5:Lienhardt E-4 (no date) 1954 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

THE SHILLUK OF THE UPPER NILE

By GODFREY LIENHARDT

THIS essay is based primarily on literary sources,[1] which contain unusually full references to the religious and cosmological ideas of the Shilluk. In places, I have reinterpreted earlier writings on the Shilluk in the light of my own knowledge of the related Dinka, and of other Nilotic studies. The concepts of these Nilotic peoples are alike in many ways, and the Shilluk and Dinka have for long been considered as related, from the point of view of anthropological theory, by the presence among them both of different forms of the institution of 'divine kingship', studied by Frazer and Seligman.[2] Upon this institution much of their interpretation of the universe and of their own place in it depend.

Lack of definition and dogma in their religion and cosmology makes it possible for Nilotic peoples to accept many different versions of their mythology and history, and also permits some syncretism of belief. I do not consider here speculations about the possible influences of ancient Egypt, the Fung, Islam, or the early monophysite Christianity of the Sudan, on Shilluk belief.[3] It is, in fact, remarkable that contact with foreign peoples and ideas, over a long period, should have left so little mark on Shilluk thought. Some of the stories which Hofmayr[4] attributes to Christian influence are widely known among other Nilotic peoples and elsewhere, in places farther removed from probable contact with Christianity. Lack of formal definition of beliefs and notions about the universe also makes the study of Shilluk cosmology necessarily a study based on inferences from myths, hymns, and other texts, collected piecemeal from informants, none of whom can speak with any final authority. It is clear that Shilluk cosmology is not present to the mind of any one Shilluk as a single, orthodox system, abstracted from the narrative flow and imaginative detail of myth. Even one man may tell slightly different versions of the same story,[5] for the telling is

[1] References throughout are to the Shilluk bibliography appended, the dates being the dates of the publications cited. Some of the sources contain many texts in the Shilluk language, and where these are translated into a language other than English, I have given an English version after examining the Shilluk text. I should like to thank all writers on the Shilluk, upon whose observations this summary and representation entirely depend. Their publications, however, are not all easily accessible, nor are they specifically concerned with the analysis of the Shilluk ideas here studied. This must be my excuse for writing about a people of great ethnological interest and importance, who have already been described in detail by writers who have known them well.

[2] J. G. Frazer, 1911. C. G. Seligman, 1911, C. G. and B. Z. Seligman, 1932.

[3] Discussion of Shilluk contacts with some of these will be found in W. Hofmayr, 1925, and D. Westermann, 1912. For general cultural and conceptual similarities between ancient Egypt and negro Africa, the reader may be referred to C. G. Seligman, 1934, and H. Frankfort, 1948, among others.

[4] 1925, pp. 195–6, the stories of a fall of man, and of a woman's bearing a god.

[5] D. S. Oyler, 1918 (i).

5:Lienhardt E-4 (no date) 1954 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

partly a creative process, and there is no writing to establish a preferred and approved text. Shilluk experience and knowledge of their world, which we here try to understand by analysis and systematization, is by them synthesised in an imaginative whole, at the centre of which are their early leader and hero, Nyikang, and the divine being which they call *juok*. Though *juok* is thought ultimately to dispose what happens in the universe, Nyikang, who created the Shilluk kingdom, is the subject of most mythology. There is nowhere any indication that the Shilluk have formulated elaborate ideas of the general order of all creation. Their notion of cosmogenesis is of the creation of that order which, as they see it, was built up by Nyikang, and has been maintained by his successors, the Shilluk kings. Before considering the wider significance of Nyikang and *juok*, it is convenient to give a brief account of the land of the Shilluk, the life they lead in it, and the general outlines of their social organization. With these in mind, it is possible to analyse their cosmological ideas in the broad outline to which an essay of this length is necessarily restricted.

Environment and History

The Shilluk live along the west bank of the Nile in the south of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, where their hamlets are built in close succession, following the line of the river from around Kaka to Lake No. They are about 110,000 people,[1] densely settled on a narrow strip of savannah country nearly 200 miles long, and four to five walking-hours in width. The soil is black and fertile near the river and its inlets, becoming sandier towards the neighbouring Arab country in the north and the Arab and Nuba country of Kordofan to the west. On the east bank of the Nile are the related Dinka, the Shilluks' neighbours to the east and south, and there are Shilluk settlements, bounded by Dinka and Nuer, on the east bank and on the lower reaches of the Sobat. Though their values are predominantly those of a cattle-herding people, the Shilluk lead a less pastoral, transhumant life than the Nuer or Dinka.[2] Their cattle are estimated at 25,000, and they keep sheep and goats. Since their settlements are strung along the bank of the Nile, they can find grass for their herds near home in the dry season, from January to April, and cultivation seems to receive more time and attention among them than among less sedentary Nilotes. From June to September the rains fall, and much of the country becomes flooded. The early rains are the time for sowing the staple crop of millet, of which many varieties are grown, along with maize, sesame, and various beans and pumpkins. These depend upon the rains, and are harvested between September and November. Tobacco, also called 'the grass of the ancestors', depends on hand-watering from the river, near which it is grown in the dry season.

[1] The authorities vary considerably in their estimates of the human and cattle population. The figures given here are quoted from those given by Mr. John Donald, of the Sudan Political Service, and published by Professor Evans-Pritchard, 1948.

[2] P. P. Howell and W. P. G. Thomson, 1946.

5:Lienhardt E-4 (no date) 1954 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

example, it is said that[1] originally God (*juok*) had the people in his land, until they ate fruit which made them sick, and God therefore sent them away. Another story tells that there was once a road to the moon which men could use, but they became too heavy to do so, in circumstances which are not here relevant.[2] Yet another story[3] tells how the sun and moon used to live together, until they quarrelled and therefore are no longer together. In some Shilluk myths (to be considered later) it is said that some men were not differentiated from animals and other creatures. There is thus the implication, though it may be conveyed in stories which are perhaps not told very seriously, that some things which were once together are now apart. The broadest division of the space around them recognized by the Shilluk is between what is above (the sky) and what is below (the earth). There is a Shilluk riddle which runs: 'What are the two half-round things (in Shilluk, *opunne*, literally 'loaves') of God (*juok*)?' and the answer is 'heaven and earth'. Hofmayr gives the explanation that 'the form in which this is figured is that of a loaf of bread'.[4] Besides sky and earth, there is the river, a third main region of the Shilluk spatial ambient. This tripartite division of the universe into earth, sky, and river, corresponds, of course, to the real categories which anyone in Shilluk country is bound in some way to acknowledge, and in which he is bound on some occasions to think. The savannah country is without mountains, ravines, forests, or other distinctive natural features which might diversify its general contours, and strike the imagination forcibly enough to modify the clarity of the simple, primary distinctions which a man observes in the natural world around him. In such a land, where there is nothing of any size to break the horizon, the sky does indeed become apparent as separate region, almost a place, in relation to the earth. Besides these, there is the river, reflecting both earth and sky. The crops and grass, on which the Shilluk and their herds depend, require that the sky should send rain and the river should rise, and they also need the fish which the river contains. The three regions of earth, sky, and river have values and associations which make the division significant in Shilluk religion and cosmology, as well as in their economy. Their Nilotic neighbours live in a country which, generally, is not unlike their own. The real foreigners come from country of different and inferior quality. Among the Dinka and Nuer also it is thought that the real foreigners come from a country different in nature from their own.

Legends of Nyikang

Legends of the birth and wanderings of Nyikang do not suggest that they occurred in a country very different from that in which the Shilluk now live, but it was a long way away from the present Shilluk kingdom. We are told that the land of Duwat, or the land of Kero, from which the Shilluk

[1] Hofmayr, 1925, p. 238. The details may be Christian.
[2] Ibid., p. 366. [3] Ibid., p. 364. [4] 1925, p. 399.

5:Lienhardt E-4 (no date) 1954 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

ornaments—which are among the royal emblems of the Shilluk at the present day, and are given to a new king at his installation.[1] The crossing of the river and the fight with the Sun seem to be occurrences of great imaginative importance for the Shilluk, as they are for the Western Dinka, in whose mythology they appear in a different form, and by whom they are associated, though in different ways, with a mythical leader who in many ways resembles Nyikang. It may be mentioned that the sun, in Shilluk country, seems to be at its hottest at the end of the dry season, just before the rains, and its heat is in a sense overcome when the rains fall. Nyikang is believed to bring the rain, and in that sense still revives his people by sprinkling them with water. At this time, too, those who have been herding cattle for the dry season on islands in the river or in pastures on the east bank of the Nile, must return to their homes on the west bank to cultivate, crossing the river in order to do so. The subduing of the Sun, and the crossing of the river by Nyikang and his followers, thus recur in different form in the lives of the Shilluk. They still have to take their cattle to pasture across the river during the dry season, and return home with them when the rains start. Westermann says that:

> The Shilluks along the White Nile cross over to the east bank; likewise the cattle of the Sobat Shilluks descend to the lagoons south of the Sobat. So in both cases they have to cross the rivers, which is, on account of the many crocodiles living in them, not undangerous, and is therefore done with much care and accompanied by weighty ceremonies in order to keep the crocodiles away; this forms an important part of the duties of the witch-doctor.[2]

In the account he gives of such a river crossing, it is said that the cattle are led behind ambatch canoes which the Shilluk use.[3] It will be remembered that the effigy of the 'crosser of the river', Nyikang, used in the installation ceremonies for the king is also made of ambatch.[4] Nyikang is important for that crossing on which the Shilluk herds depend for their grazing. In another Shilluk text Nyikang asks his mother, Nyakaya, to dry up the river in order to help his people against foreign enemies.[5]

In the stories here summarized, Nyikang, the leader and first king of the Shilluk, is able to affect celestial phenomena—he may also raise winds and bring rain—and he divides the river to lead his people across. By agnatic descent he is linked either with a man from heaven or with a special creation of God, and through his mother, Nyakaya, he is linked with the river. He is also the leader by whom the Shilluk were first differentiated as a separate people, and who gave them their present land. His praise-names and titles of honour acknowledge and record his association with sky, river, and earth. Apart from those already mentioned, he has the names 'heaven'

[1] Crazzolara, 1950, p. 30.
[2] Westermann, 1912, Introduction, xxix–xxx.
[3] Ibid., p. 172.
[4] Thomson, 1948, p. 150. This is a correction of Howell and Thomson, 1946, where it is said that the effigy of Nyikang was made of bamboo, like that of his son Dak.
[5] Hofmayr, 1925, p. 55.

5:Lienhardt E-4 (no date) 1954 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

or 'the above', and 'cloud'; he is called 'son of the Nile' and 'son of the river';[1] and in hymns[2] he is called 'our earth' or 'master of the earth'. Thus, all three regions of the Shilluk universe are nominally assimilated to Nyikang, and he to them. It is the single person of Nyikang which gives all three regions their coherence in a single world. There is no other figure in Shilluk mythology, except his successors and representatives the Shilluk kings, who thus associates earth, sky, and river, belonging in part to all.

Significance of Nyikang in the Shilluk World View

Although Nyikang was a man, and is conceived as such by the Shilluk, he is believed not to have died, and thus he is not identified with ordinary men.[3] He is said to have disappeared. Oyler[4] gives some of the expressions which the Shilluk use of Nyikang's end; 'he was lost', 'he returned to his country', 'he went up', 'he became wind', 'he went and lives': all expressions implying that he did not die. He adds that the Shilluk say 'that if Nikawng should die, the whole Shilluk race would perish'. Even now the king of the Shilluk is not spoken of as having died, though the later Shilluk kings, unlike Nyikang and his immediate successors, are thought to have become mortal. Since, as I have suggested, Nyikang is a notion by which the Shilluk apprehend a unity and coherence in the specifically Shilluk world, it is understandable that now, when a king dies, the Shilluk say, 'there is no land—the Shilluk country has ceased to be'.[5] It is not simply that Nyikang and his successors are thought to maintain the order of the Shilluk social and natural universe as though from a position above and outside it. In Nyikang, and in the kings, the parts which make up that order are correlated, and the correlation is apprehended in a single term, Nyikang. He and his successors are thought of as real historical persons, living at their own particular times and with their own unique characteristics and legends. They also represent the idea of a timeless state, unaffected by the chronological succession of events. Every king, representing Nyikang, represents the principle which unifies the Shilluk as a nation, and brings into focus the widest range of specifically Shilluk ideas about the order of nature and of society.

It was Nyikang who first separated the Shilluk people from others of the same stock, who ordered them not to mix with their early enemies,[6] who differentiated them among themselves by associating different lineages with different territories and, where totemic, with different totems, and who made the territorial divisions of Shilluk-land. Thus, he is both a unifying and a differentiating principle in Shilluk thought. The processes of individuation and separation, attributed to Nyikang, involve the creation of the ordered relationship of the individual and separate parts to each other, as the Shilluk understand it. Myths of Nyikang are ways of apprehending that relationship. It is said, for example, that the Nuba have some right,

[1] Hofmayr, 1925, p. 43.
[2] Ibid., p. 45.
[3] Howell and Thomson, 1946, p. 18.
[4] Ibid., *passim*.
[5] Oyler, 1918 (i), p. 115.
[6] Hofmayr, op. cit., p. 7.

5:Lienhardt E-4 (no date) 1954 FJ23 Shilluk FJ23

theme of these ceremonies was the avoidance of Nyikang and a fear of his power, accompanied by the veiling of the objects particularly associated with him. The complexity of this behaviour, particularly the 'fear and laughter', demands a more penetrating analysis than is possible here.

Conclusion

In such a brief account it has been possible to give only an outline of the cosmological ideas and social values of the Shilluk, and it has been inevitable also that these should have been somewhat over-formalized and systematized. Shilluk cosmological ideas are embedded in belief and action. They are not systematized by the people themselves, who reveal them only by their sayings and their behaviour. It is impossible to give an account of them without abstracting them from the reality, formulating them as ideas with a certain degree of coherence between them, and thus constructing a system which has no exact counterpart in the thought of the Shilluk themselves. Such an account is bound to show, here and there, that effort to achieve consistency which is part of our tradition, but not of theirs. I have tried to show how the order known to the Shilluk is dependent upon their belief in a mythical hero and king, Nyikang, who is the figure to which every subsequent Shilluk king is assimilated in thought. This assimilation is enacted in the ritual for the installation of each new king. Nyikang is an analogue, for the Shilluk, of the power which created and maintains the universe. That power, which I have been content to call God, is of greater importance to the Shilluk as a source of vitality, both intellectual and physical, than as a being with ethical attributes. Nyikang and the kings similarly belong not to an ethical, but to a metaphysical system. Shilluk religion is concerned with the maintenance, as a divine order, of the order in which they live and have always lived. The kings, and Nyikang, are held to represent that order, which without them would not exist. The death of a king and the installation of his successor, are therefore of critical importance in the Shilluk kingdom, and that importance is marked by ceremonies of great imaginative and symbolic richness. The importance and uniqueness of the king is similarly emphasized by the existence of a special vocabulary used of him, and by various special observances which may be studied in the literature. They mark him off from ordinary men, no less than his titles—'first-born of God', 'child of God', 'reflection of the ancestors', 'master of the world', 'last-born of God', and others.[1] Any particular king, however, is also, as an individual human being, to some degree unequal to the office. The Shilluk have no superstitious reverence for the individual human king, and many kings have been removed by violent death when, for one reason or another, their people have tired of them. It is, perhaps, chiefly after the climax of the installation ceremonies that the dignity of the office, and the human nature

[1] Hofmayr, 1925, p. 150. The 'first-born' and the 'last-born' have special status, at least in Dinka thought, because the first 'opens the way' for the others, while the other 'closes the way'. They are, so to speak, the alpha and omega of generation.